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STORY OF

THE

BITTER WEDDING.



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GLASGOW:

PRINTED FOR THE BOOKSELLERS.

THE
BITTER WEDDING.

ONE fine summer morning---it was many hundred years ago---young Berthold set out with a very heavy heart from his Alpine hut, with a view of reaching in the evening the beautiful valley of Siebenthal, where stood his native village, and where he designed to be an unknown and silent guest at the dancing and festivity of certain merry makers.

‘Ah, heavens,’ sighed he, ‘it will be a bitter wedding! Had I died last spring it had been better with me now.’

‘Fiddle faddle!’ exclaimed a snarling voice from the road side. ‘Fiddle faddle! Where master Almerich touches his strings, there goes it merrily---there is the hurly burly, dirling the bottoms out of the tubs and pitchers! Good morning, my child! Come, cheer up my hearty, and let us trudge on together in good neighbourship.’

The young herdsman had stopped when he heard such a frog-croak of a voice, and now he could not speak for laughing. An odd-looking dwarfish figure mounted upon

one leg and a half, and propped upon a crutch, with a nose as long as one's thumb, came hobbling up quite out of breath, and making half-a-dozen wry faces, from a foot path on the left side of the road. Behind him he trailed an enormous fiddle, on which lay a large wallet---appurtenances which seemed to be attached to such a little odd figure by way of ballast, lest the rush of the wind down the valley should sweep it away.

‘Good morning!’ Berthold at last roared out, ‘you are a merry fellow, Master fiddler, and will prove heart’s ease to me to-day. In spite of my misfortunes I could not help laughing at the sight of you and your hugeous fiddle. Pray take it not amiss; a laugh has been a rare thing with me for many a day.’

‘Has it indeed,’ rejoined the dwarf; ‘and yet so young! Perhaps you are heart-sick, my son?’

‘Yes, if you choose to call it so,’ replied the herdsman. ‘Here in our mountains and valleys, you will find a great many clouts of fellows who will be fancying themselves in love, while they are all the time eating, drinking, and sleeping, as sound as any marmot, and in one year’s time can as easily pass from Margaret to Rosomund, as I from this town to the other. That is all a mockery; I would much rather die than forget

Siegeland,---though for me all rest and joy are for ever vanished.'

'Aye, aye,' replied Master Almerich, 'I thought you were going to the dance, my hearty,---I heard you crying out a bitter wedding, and I thought to myself, 'Aha, he does not get the right one.'

'And that's true enough,' replied Berthold; 'he does not get the right one,---that Hildebrand! I will tell you the whole matter, Master Almerich, as you seem to be going the same way, if I guess right.'

'Ah, yes, good heavens!' sighed the dwarf: 'surely, surely, I would be going to the wedding, if I had only got a pair of stout legs, but look you here, my dear child, what a miserable stump is this for crawling down the mountain!---I am asthmatic too, and my goitre has been enlarging these last fifty years,---and that wallet has galled my back sore all yesterday in climbing over the rough hills--. Heaven knows when I shall get to the wedding! There was such a talking about it on the other side of the mountain, that, thought I to myself, I will away to the wedding also and make some money; so I took my fiddle and began to crawl up the ascent,---yesterday I became quite exhausted---and now I must lay me down here by the side of the road and submit to fate. Tell me all about the wedding when you re-

turn, child---if the wolves have not swallowed or hunger killed me before that time.'

With these words the dwarf, apparently exhausted, sunk down with a deep and melancholy sigh on the nearest stone, threw his bundle on the grass, and stretched out his bony hand as if to take a last farewell of young Berthold, who stood leaning upon his staff, and gazing upon the fiddler, quite unable to comprehend what ailed him.

'Master,' began the herdsman, 'how drooping! You have left all your gay spirits at home! Although it is a weary journey for me as well as you, I will yet endeavour to carry your wallet and fiddle, so I may enjoy your company on the road. You must really hear what presses upon my soul,---perhaps I may obtain some relief in speaking it out, and you will have some pithy word of comfort for me.

The dwarf accepted the kind offer and quickly transferred his wallet and fiddle to the stout shoulders of the herdsman; then taking his crutch, he whistled a merry tune, and trudged gaily on by the side of Berthold.

'It is a long story this wedding,' begun the herdsman; 'but I will be as brief as possible, for it still grieves me to the heart when I think about it, and whoever can understand it at all, understands it soon; as for me my sufferings will never be at an

end, though I should talk the whole day about it.

‘In the village there, below us, old Bernhard has a pretty sweet girl of a daughter, Siegelind; he has lived for many years, and his wife Gertrude with him, in a nice little cottage by the stream, where the road strikes off into the wood. Their trade is to make wooden spoons for the herdsmen, by which, and the help of a goat and a couple of sheep, they gain their livelihood.’

‘Last winter, having got some ashen spoons and cups nicely cut, I thought with myself, now, as my father is getting old, and sends me with the cattle to the mountains in spring, if I only behave there as becomes a herdsman, what is there to prevent me coming down in autumn and marrying Siegelind?’

‘Ah, Master Almerich, my words do poor justice to my heart; my feelings always get the start of them, and reason comes limping after!’

‘I beheld Siegelind, you see, moving actively about,---wearing a merry face late and early,---all goodness and discretion from top to toe, and pretty too,---overflowing with gay spirits and merry songs without number. all this my eye, my ear, and my heart drunk in smoothly,---she was satisfied, and the old people too,---so in summer I was to go to the

mountains, and at harvest-home to the wedding, and in the meantime she gave me this waistcoat to wear on the hills in remembrance of her.

‘Old Bernhard went to the forest in spring to choose the finest stems, and to provide us with nice furniture against the wedding.

‘So one morning as he was ascending the mountains through those ravines where there are some marvellously fine trees, a little man, in an odd sort of dress, hastened to meet him, screaming violently and beckoning and calling him so earnestly that he could not but go with him. They soon reached a barn, where he found the stranger’s wife lying sick and in extremity. Her he relieved and cured; but for me---bride, peace, and happiness, were lost from that hour.’

‘Ah, good heavens!’ exclaimed Almerich; ‘you are talking bravely, whilst I am almost starving---hop, hop, hop---we are trudging on, and my stomach is as empty as a bag-pipe! Yesterday evening---nothing; this morning---nothing! Oh that brave wedding-dance; the fiddle runs off, and Master Almerich is starving here!’

‘Now, now, the deuce, then,’ bawled the herdsman, ‘what have you got in this cursed wallet? Here am I toiling on with this plagued bag, rubbing the very skin off my shoulders,---if there is not at least a little ham

and cheese and fresh bread in it, why should I be smothered under such a bundle of rags !'

'Softly, softly, my son,' replied the fiddler, 'there are treasures in that wallet, an old barret cap of Siegefried, and an old sword belt of Dieterich, and a couple of old leathern soles of Ylsan, child !---These are no every-day concerns, my hearty ! They are all estimable jewels to him who understands the thing ; they are worth a whole mountain of sweet wine, and seven acres of thick golden wheat, to him who knows their value.'

'It may be so,' said the herdsman, 'I only wish we had a few cups of milk in the place of your treasures ; but if it is so with your stomach, my good master, look you, here is a mouthful of goatmilk cheese, I meant to serve me for the night, but never mind, I am little disposed to eat.'

Berthold now produced his provisions, and Almerich devoured them as greedily as if he meant to swallow the herdsman after them by way of dessert. He then wiped his mouth, leaped briskly up, was again in good spirits, and stumped away before the herdsman as freshly as if nothing had ailed him. All this, however, seemed very odd to Berthold, and when he again felt the annoyance of the wallet, he drew a sigh so deep that it echoed back from the neighbouring rocks.

'Lack a day!' cried Almerich again, 'the poor lad has lost his bride and his peace of heart; I have been so concerned about him that I could not eat a bit?'

'That fellow could devour the Stackhorn,' thought Berthold with some indignation. 'The club foot is not in his right senses, I believe!'

'It was really to bad,' began he, resuming his story. 'The dwarf in the barn returned a profusion of thanks to old Bernhard, and said, 'I am a foreign miner, and have lost the road with my good wife; so I have nothing to reward you for your kind services, save a little bit of cheese and a few draughts of wine, take that, and remember the poor fellow who gave you what he could, and will pray that Heaven may reward you farther.'

'Old Bernhard accepted the little bottle and a piece of cheese only to get rid of the importunity of the dwarf, who would take no refusal.

'Towards noon, he was proceeding to his village; the road was long, and feeling fatigued, he lay down in the shade of a tree, took out the gift of the dwarf, and began to eat and drink. Meanwhile, who should my evil stars bring in his way but young Hildebrand, the most miserly fellow in the village! 'God bless you, father Bernhard!'

---‘Thank you my son.’ Thus the conversation proceeded. The niggard sees the old man comfortably enjoying his repast; so he sets himself down beside him and takes a share. There they eat and eat for about an hour,---but the wine never gets less, and the cheese is never done, and both behold the miracle till their hair stands on end.

‘All was now over, Master fiddler, and poor Berthold was undone!’

‘Hildebrand chose words which went down with Bernhard as smoothly as honey, and the long and the short of the matter was, my dear sweet Siegelind was promised to the rich miser, with the marvellous cheese for her dowry. The old man was now quite beside himself,---the young man talked finely---they were to outdo the whole village, and keep their secret to themselves; I was called a miserable wretch, and the spirit of mischief just brought me into their way in time to hear the whole sad story.’

‘Ah, good heavens,’ exclaimed Almerich again, ‘I am undone with cold; it is turning a chill rainy day, and my bones are so naked!---Hew, hew, how the storm blows into my very soul! This day will be the death of me.---I thought so before. Take your way, my son, I give you my fiddle in a present,---leave me the wallet here, I will stretch myself out to die upon it.’

‘The mischief is in it!’ grumbled Berthold. ‘If matters are to go on in this way, we shall be a year and a day hence still travelling this cursed road? Hark ye, old boy, you are an odd fellow! what tempted you to think of wandering through our rough country, without meat or drink or even a coat, but with a fiddle as large as a ton, and an empty wallet as heavy as seven three stone cheeses! ’Tis a perfect tempting of Providence! Why the deuce do you drag after you that ass’s burden of old rubbish, without so much as the convenience of a cloak in your bundle!’

‘It is all very true,’ sighed Almerich. ‘I am not yet accustomed to be the lame, feeble man you now see me. Thirty years ago I could skip like a leveret over hills and dales; but now, farewell to friend Almerich, I shall never leave this place! However it is all one,---perish here, or die there, a dying bed is ever a hard one, even though it should be of down and silk?’

‘Now really,’ replied Berthold, ‘you are too whimsical, fiddler! The cold blast never hurts a tough fellow who is accustomed to run about the mountains,---there, slip into my coat, and walk smartly on, for a shower is approaching, and that rascally wallet is weighing me down to the ground.’

‘Patience, child, patience!’ said Almerich --- ‘This coat is quite warm from your

shoulders,---I feel very comfortable in it,---slowly, gently, your story of the marvellous cheese and wine has restored me to warmth---how did the matter go on?’

‘You rogue and rascal!’ thought Berthold to himself, and thus continued his lamentable tale.

‘How did it go on!---Gertrude sang to the same tune as her husband; Siegelind grew sad, and lost her bloom and strength; the old boy urged the matter, and Hildebrand too,---Bernhard was anxious to get the rich and proud son-in-law, and was in great fear lest the enchanted wine should soon dry up,---the young fellow had money in his eye, and wished to turn the bewitched cheese to usury,---thus the wedding was determined on, and I was left in sadness upon my mountain. I tried to forget it; I thought Siegelind could not have borne me in her heart, otherwise she would not, even to escape death and martyrdom, have married the red haired Hildebrand. Last night, however, I could find neither rest nor sleep upon my straw, I must go and see her with my own eyes take that miser for her husband. Near the village I will wrap up my head and dye my hands and cheeks with berries, so that nobody will know me,---nor in the bustle of the wedding, when every thing is turning topsy turvy, will a living soul care for poor

Berthold. When all is over, I shall, so it please Heaven, become wise again; or if not, my poor brain will be turned altogether, and that will be a blessing too.'

'My good child,' said the dwarf, 'you will get over all this. I perceive very well that it is a hard journey, and a bitter wedding too for you: but it is your good luck, my child, that you have me for a companion--- I will fiddle till your heart leaps again,--- your sorrow grieves me as much as if it were my own.'

Whilst talking thus, a few drops of rain fell, which proved the prelude to a heavy shower; and although the travellers had already gone a considerable way, they were still far from the end of their journey, and gush after gush, the rain poured upon their heads till the water run down from their hats as from a spout.

Berthold trudged silently on, sighing frequently and heavily under his burden,---he could have sworn that it increased a pound's weight every step, nevertheless it was impossible for his good nature to think of giving it back to the poor cripple in such a tempest. The rain soon began to trickle through his waistcoat, and run in a cold stream down his back, he wished himself, the dwarf, and the wedding all far enough, but stalked sullenly on through the mud as if he had

been wading through the highest Alpine grass.

The fiddler limped close behind him, croaking occasionally through his raven throat, an old spring song, which told of sunshine, and singing birds, and pleasure, and love. At times he drew himself snugly together, and expatiated on the excellencies of the herdsman's coat, which he declared was quite waterproof,---and then he would exhort Berthold to step leisurely, to pay particular attention to the wallet and fiddle, and above all not to overheat himself.

The herdsman would have lost all patience and courage a thousand times over in dragging his hundred weight of a load and playing the fool to the crazy fiddler, if he had not been ashamed to throw away the burden which he had volunteered to carry, and forsake the person whose company he had himself invited. But in his heart he vowed deeply and solemnly never again to lend his coat to a fiddler, nor give away his cheese, nor to carry a fiddle and wallet, and after all be mocked and laughed at by such an odd quiz of a fellow. 'If,' thought he at last, 'the upshot of all this is a fever in the evening which carries me quickly off---be it so,---it remains a bitter wedding!'

After a few hours rain, the two pedestrians reached the valley, where a swollen and

rapid torrent, which had swept away every vestige of the little bridge that led to the village, with the exception of a single small plank, rushed across the path; the herdsman heeded not the narrow footing, and was stepping boldly across, when his companion began to roar out lustily about the dangers of the path: 'For my life and soul I will not move from the spot! Neither cat nor rat could pass over there,---I would be a dead man if I ventured on that cursed plank! Let them fiddle yonder who can swim,---I wish I was in a feather bed with my fiddle for a pillow!'

'Don't make such a noise about it!' cried Berthold. 'If we have got thus far, we will surely go on a little farther,---if I have brought the fiddler this length to the bitter dance, I will also bring him to the wedding house,---though I am a fool, I am nevertheless a good-natured one.'

With these words the herdsman took off the fiddle and wallet from his back, and supplied the place with the dwarf, whom he carried over as easily as a bundle of straw. He then returned for the fiddle, wallet, and crutch, which lay as heavy as so many stones upon his shoulders.

'Well, the best of it now is,' said he, that we shall soon reach the village,---but either my head is turned, or that wallet is filled

with flesh and blood, and master Almerich's body is stuffed with chaff !'

'Nonsense !' replied the fiddler with a broad grin, 'You have behaved well, child ; it would be a great pity if the bride yonder would not get you ; you have the genuine patience of the lamb in you, yet I perceive you have also strength enough, with your heart in the right place, and as much wisdom as there is any need of in the country. Come, let us paint your cheeks, and put on the old cap you will find in my wallet, and the green waistcoat and get that belt about you ; to-day you will be the fiddler's boy, and not a living creature know you.'

The fiddler opened his wallet and threw out its contents to Berthold, whose face he painted with cranberries, and beard and eyebrows with a bit of coal, and then they walked gaily on towards the village.

Evening was just coming on, and the sun broke out all at once from under the clouds, ---the birds began to sing cheerfully,---the flowers opened their leaves as if to listen, and Berthold felt his clothes sooner dried than if he had been sitting close to a large fire.

In a few minutes our wanderers mingled with the merry wedding-guests ; noises and merriment were echoing all around, and no one looked sad but Siegelind, who kept her

tearful eyes fixed upon the ground. The old fiddler was welcomed with shouts of applause; for the rain had prevented the arrival of the band of fiddlers and pipers who had been invited on the occasion, and every body thought it a piece of marvellous good luck for the wedding that master Almerich should have got through.

‘Now, children,’ exclaimed the old boy, ‘fetch us something to drink, and some cheese and bread, and do not forget that youth who has dragged myself as well as my fiddle here to-day.’

The guests hastened to execute the old fiddler’s commands, and even Gertrude and Bernhard bustled about to serve him. Poor Berthold’s heart was bleeding, but he kept eating and drinking, that he might not be obliged to speak. Meanwhile the old fiddler put dry strings on his instrument, and began to tune it so stoutly that it thrilled through marrow and bone, and quickly drew the attention of all upon the musician.

‘Bless me,’ whispered Bernhard to Gertrude, ‘upon my faith it is the very dwarf who gave me the bewitched wine and cheese! Be gentle to him wife, and say not a single word.’

All at once the fiddle struck up so briskly that the very house shook with blow upon blow,---he commenced such a furious strain

that the whole company leaped up from their benches and began dancing as if they were mad. ‘Heigh, heigh!’ shouted the people. ‘There is a fiddle!’ and every one capered and whirled through the wedding chamber as if they danced for a wager. The young people led out the dance, and the old ones hobbled as fast after them as they could; and nobody stood idle but Siegelind---who wished herself ten thousand miles away from the merriment---and Berthold, who gazed stedfastly and sorrowfully upon his beloved.

In the midst of his fiddling, Master Almerich beckoned to the beautiful bride to step near him; ‘There stands a little bottle yonder where your bridegroom has been seated, and some old cheese with it,---I dare say it will not be the worst in the house,---I would taste a little of it,---this playing makes me a little nice in the palate.’

The good natured bride brought the bottle and cheese, and placed them on a chair beside him, knowing no reasonable objection to the old man’s taking as much as he could eat.

The dwarf quickly laid his fiddle aside, raised the bewitched bottle in his right hand, and the cheese in his left, and exclaimed with a loud voice, ‘Well, my good people, well, here’s the health of that beautiful bride there and her sweetheart; may she live long and joyfully!’

‘Long and joyfully!’ resounded through the room, while fifty bonnets and hats were tossed up into the air.

But horror struck and deadly pale did Hildebrand and Bernhard and Gertrude become when they saw the wondrous wine and enchanted cheese in Almerich’s uplifted fist. ‘Dares he---can he---will he!’ darted through their hearts. But, woe and alas! in one turn of his hand, the glutton with his large ox-mouth, had swallowed the bewitched draught and marvellous cheese without leaving a morsel!

A roar of passion from the red haired Hildebrand, and a gush of tears from Gertrude, now terrified the people: while old Bernhard stood like one petrified. But a cheerful smile lightened upon the countenance of Siegelind, and Berthold rose boldly from his bench, and stood ready to use his fists upon Hildebrand if he should dare to touch the fiddler.

‘You rogue! you beggar!’ at last exclaimed Hildebrand. ‘Who told you to give that old fool of a fiddler that gift of heaven? You may now toss your house and your bride too to the moon; I no longer care a straw for you or all that belongs to you!’

With words of venom and execration, Hildebrand rushed out of the room, whilst

the enraged Bernhard and his crowd of guests looked terrified after him. 'I am an undone man! at last exclaimed Bernhard. 'My child and we are all ruined! The wedding feast and the adornments are all unpaid! Oh cursed, horrid miser! bring me a knife---a knife!'

'A fig for a knife!' exclaimed the fiddler. 'See here is the bridegroom just come, who has brought with him a whole wallet full of gold,---and the bride loves him with all her heart, and the guests are all together---and my fiddle is in glorious tune!'

With these words Almerich crippled forward to the half bewildered and yet joyful Berthold, and drew him into the circle: he then wiped the paint off his face with the skirts of his coat, and showed to the delighted bride and the astonished guests their well known neighbour, who was dear and welcome to all. He then ordered the wallet to be dragged forward, and having opened the lock, behold a prodigious quantity of pure red gold tumbled out from it, dazzling the eyes of all with its splendour! Old Bernhard and Gertrude embraced Berthold with tears of repentance, and Berthold by turns embraced the lovely Siegelind and the ugly dwarf. Almerich took his fiddle and struck up a tune which bewitched them all, and they danced till midnight in joy and glory. The

musician then escaped, and left a whole house full of merry-makers around the two happy lovers, who, till their last day, a thousand times blessed the bitter wedding in which they had been so wonderfully united by the benevolent lame dwarf.



